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CHAPTER THREE

THE ACQUISITION OF SER AND ESTAR IN 2L1 ENGLISH-SPANISH DATA

RADOSLAVA STANKOVA LAYKOVA
AND RAQUEL FERNÁNDEZ FUERTES
UNIVERSITY OF VALLADOLID (SPAIN)

Introduction

In the early stages of both monolingual and bilingual first language acquisition (2L1), children acquiring their first language (L1) often omit functional categories (Brown 1973). In this paper, we focus on the acquisition of a functional category, the Spanish copula verbs, in 2L1 English-Spanish data. Our objectives are, firstly, to determine whether the two copulas in Spanish, i.e. *ser* and *estar*, are simultaneously or sequentially acquired; secondly, to establish whether there is a difference in the acquisition of these copulas as they appear with individual-level predicates (ILPs) and stage-level predicates (SLPs); and finally, to ascertain whether the linguistic context where the bilinguals under analysis are raised plays a role in the acquisition of this grammatical property. These combined issues have not been addressed in previous studies on the monolingual and bilingual acquisition of the Spanish copulas. Therefore, our work involves a direct contribution to the field, in that it helps to shed further light on the different intertwined processes that are involved in the acquisition of the Spanish copulas.

Formal accounts of copula verbs

The copula verb is grammatically analysed as a link between the subject and the predicate conveying morphosyntactic information (verbal inflection, Infl) (Becker 2000) but without any actual lexical contribution to the sentence (Schütze 2000). It can be followed by two different types of predicate: ILPs and SLPs. The former type entails permanent or inherent characteristics of the subject, while the latter involves accidental or temporary ones. ILPs typically appear with determiner phrases (DPs) as seen in (1), while SLPs typically occur with prepositional phrases (PPs) as seen in (2) and adverbial phrases (AdvPs).

(1) Pedro es un hombre.
ILP-DP
"Peter is a man"

(2) María está en la universidad.
SLP-PP
"Mary is at the university"

Adjectival phrases (AdjPs) can also appear in copula constructions and they can be part of both ILPs (3) and SLPs (4), depending on their semantic contribution.

(3) El color blanco es sucio.
ILP-AdjP
"White is a dirty colour"

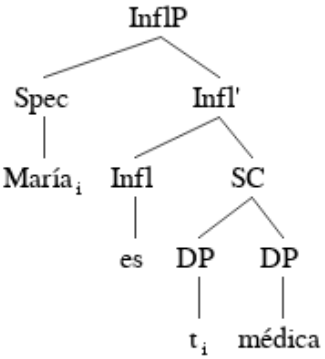
(4) La camisa blanca está sucia.
SLP-AdjP
"The white shirt is dirty"

Traditionally, *ser* has been associated with permanent properties, i.e. ILPs, and *estar* with temporary properties, i.e. SLPs. However, this distinction is not categorical as both copulas overlap in several contexts (e.g. Camacho 2012).

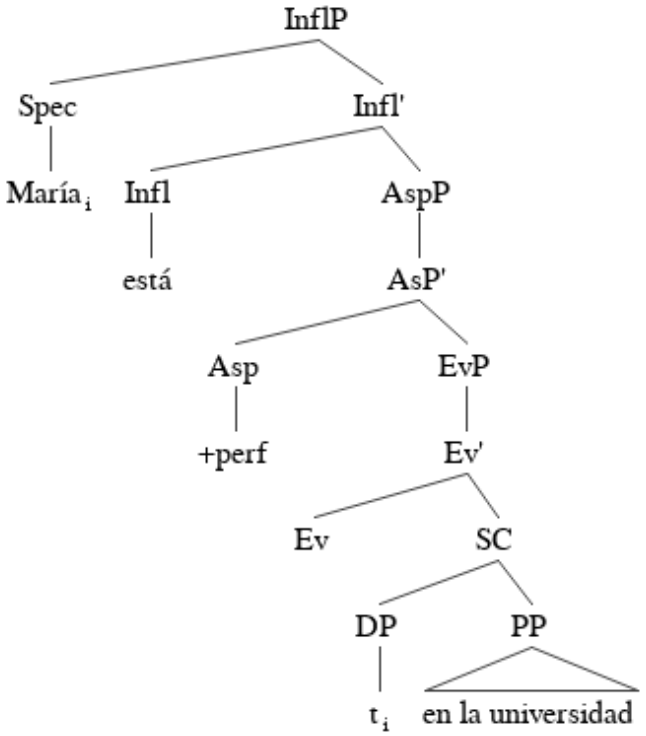
The distinction between ILPs and SLPs has been formally attributed to the notion of temporal anchoring, i.e. "the biding relation between tense (T) and tense operator (T_{OP})" (Fernández Fuertes and Liceras 2010a, 529). In particular, and following Guéron and Hoekstra (1995), the category that ensures temporal anchoring in the sentence is verbal Infl, as in (5) and (6).

However, what underlies the ILP-SLP distinction is the availability, or lack thereof, of another category that could take up this role.

(5) María es médica. (ILP)
"Mary is a doctor"



(6) María está en la universidad. (SLP)
"Mary is at the university"



ILPs (5) are non-aspectual predicates and, therefore, the clause can only be temporally bound through Infl. However, SLPs (6) are aspectual predicates and, therefore, they have both Infl and an aspectual phrase (AspP). According to Becker (2000), when children are in the process of acquiring the adult requirement, they could select other categories to ensure temporal anchoring—while this is an option in the case of SLPs (as Asp instead of Infl could be selected), this is not possible in the case of ILPs. Consequently, children omit the copula when it occurs with SLPs (as Asp could ensure temporal anchoring), but not so much with ILPs (as the copula is needed to ensure temporal anchoring).

Previous works on the acquisition of the Spanish copulas by bilinguals

The acquisition of *ser* and *estar* by 2L1 English-Spanish children has been addressed in previous works. Silva-Corvalán and Montanari (2008) and Silva-Corvalán (2014) studied the data from an English-Spanish bilingual child in the USA, from the age of two until the age of three. They concluded that there is no cross-linguistic influence between the one-copula language (i.e. English) and the two-copula language (i.e. Spanish); that *ser* is acquired before *estar*; and that there is a parallelism between the child's production and the adult input he receives in terms of predicate types, verbal tenses and the communicative functions of both copulas.

Fernández Fuertes and Liceras (2010a; 2010b) analysed the spontaneous production of two English-Spanish bilinguals in Spain and, in the case of the Spanish copula, they show that both copula omission and overextension rates (i.e. *ser* instead of *estar* or *estar* instead of *ser*) are very low and, in the case of overextensions, they are mostly instances of *ser* instead of *estar* (e.g. *soy un poco malito*, instead of *estoy un poco malito*, "I am a little bit sick"). Both results are in line with previous studies on monolingual and bilingual Spanish (Bel 2001; Sera 1992; Silva-Corvalán and Montanari 2008).

Stankova Laykova (2016) analysed three different copula systems (Spanish, English, and Bulgarian) in two 2L1 English-Spanish children and one 2L1 Bulgarian-Spanish child. She concluded that, in the one copula languages (i.e. English and Bulgarian), omission is linked to predicate type as more omissions are present with SLPs. Furthermore, she argues that these children behave in the same way as their monolingual counterparts.

Hypotheses

Three hypotheses guide this research. The first one deals with the order of acquisition of the two Spanish copulas. In line with the formal distinction between ILPs and SLPs (Guéron and Hoekstra 1995) and as seen in previous works on acquisition (e.g. Silva-Corvalán and Montanari 2008), we hold that children are more likely to start producing *ser* before *estar* as clauses containing SLPs could be temporally bound via Infl or Asp, while ILPs can only be so via Infl. This would, therefore, involve an earlier emergence of the structure that is syntactically simpler, i.e. ILPs as seen in (5) versus (6) above.

The second hypothesis is linked to the production of the copulas regarding the predicate type, i.e. ILP or SLP. In line with Becker (2000; 2004), we claim that more omissions will be found with SLPs than with ILPs as the latter can only be temporally anchored via Infl and, therefore, the verb is required to be overt.

Finally, the third hypothesis considers the possible effect that the linguistic context of these children (Spain vs. UK) could have in their copula production. One could assume that living in Spain would involve more exposure to Spanish, and living in the UK more to English; in turn, this could be linked to dominance and have an impact on the presence and on the directionality of cross-linguistic influence. That is, a higher exposure to Spanish and, therefore, a higher amount of input in Spanish could result in earlier attainment of the adult grammar with respect to the Spanish copulas. This would imply an advantage for bilinguals living in Spain over those living in the UK. However, Paradis and Genesee (1996) argue that there need not be a linear correspondence between input quantity and linguistic development. Consequently, and given the strength of the Spanish copula as defended by Fernández Fuertes and Liceras (2010), we hypothesise that the linguistic context will not significantly influence the acquisition of this grammatical property and that children in both the UK and Spain will behave similarly in this respect.

Method

Data selection

Data from two corpora (FerFuLice and Deuchar) in CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000) have been analysed. The FerFuLice corpus contains spontaneous longitudinal data elicited from Simon and Leo, two identical twins, who were born in Spain. Their father is a Spanish native speaker,

while their mother is an English native speaker. Each parent communicates with the children in his or her native language.

The Deuchar corpus contains spontaneous longitudinal data elicited from Manuela, who was born in the UK. Her father is a Spanish native speaker, while her mother is an English native speaker. They communicate with Manuela in Spanish, while her grandmother and carers do so in English.

Child	Age-range	MLU	Languages	Place of residence	Corpus
Simon	1;3-2;5	1.667-1.935	English-Spanish	Spain	FerFuLice
Leo	1;3-2;5	1.333-2.203	English-Spanish	Spain	FerFuLice
Manuela	1;3-2;6	1.250-2-034	English-Spanish	UK	Deuchar

Table 3-1. Spanish data selection

As Table 3-1 shows, the three children present similar MLU (Mean Length of Utterance) values which indicates that they are at the same developmental stage (Brown 1973) and are, consequently, fully comparable. As the children from the FerFuLice corpus are raised in Spain, while the child from the Deuchar corpus is raised in the UK, we can analyse how the Spanish copulas are acquired in two different linguistic contexts (as per hypothesis three above).

Data classification

The copula constructions produced by these children have been extracted and classified excluding repetitions and one-word utterances. The classification involves three variables: verb type (i.e. *ser* (7) or *estar* (8)), predicate type (i.e. ILPs (7) or SLPs (8)), and adulthood. For this last variable, it was considered whether the copula is produced (7-8) or whether it is omitted, as indicated by the empty category *e* (9), and, in the first case, whether the right copula is used or rather is an overextension. However, no overextension cases were found in the data.

(7) **Es** un tren. (Leo, 2;2, FerFuLice) IL
"It's a train"

(8) **Está** aquí. (Manuela, 2;02, Deuchar) SL
"It's here"

(9) La caca ***e*** aquí. (Leo, 2;1, FerFuLice)
"The poo (is) here"

Data analysis

A total of 138 utterances were extracted, out of which 118 (85.5%) are adult-like and 20 (14.5%) are non-adult-like. From a developmental perspective and to address the first hypothesis, data have been classified to determine which copula occurs earlier in the speech of these children, as figures 3-1, 3-2 and 3-3 show.

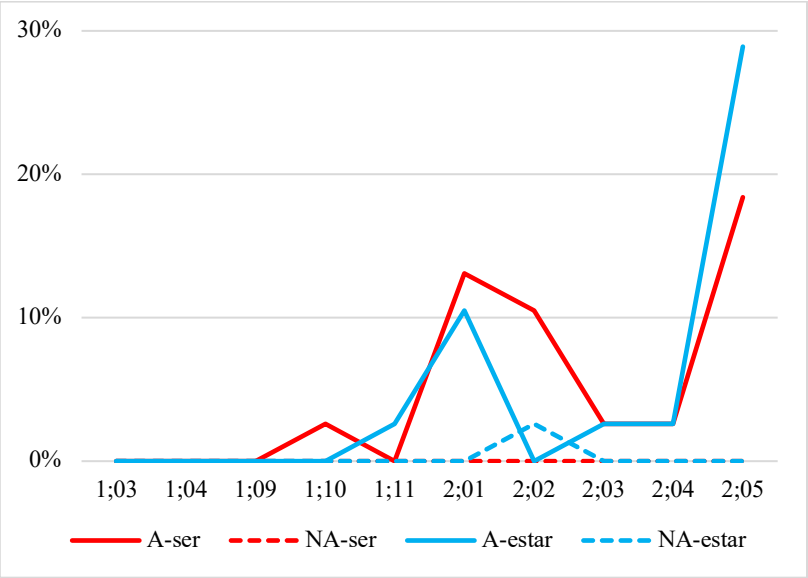


Figure 3-1. Developmental analysis: Simon
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Figure 3-1 shows that for Simon *ser* (1;10) appears earlier than *estar* (1;11); however, this difference is not statistically significant (F(1)=5.32, *p*=.06). The rates of adult-like constructions with both copulas are significantly higher than the non-adult-like constructions throughout the whole study—(F(5.72)=4.41, *p*=.00) for *ser*, and (F(2.40)=4.41, *p*=.01) for *estar*.

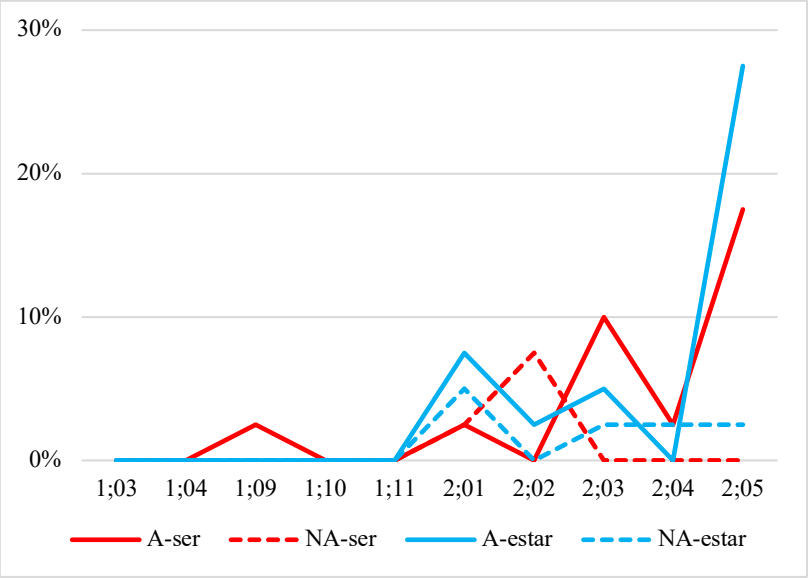

Figure 3-2. Developmental analysis: Leo
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In the case of Leo (Figure 3-2), *ser* (1;9) appears earlier than *estar* (2;1), but this age difference is not statistically significant (*p*=1.2). Moreover, the rates of adult-like *ser* constructions are significantly higher throughout the whole study period (F(1.58)=4.41, *p*=.03), except at the age of 2;1 (*p*=.09).

Regarding *estar*, the rate of adult-like constructions is significantly higher throughout the whole study period (F(1.17)=4.41, *p*=.03).

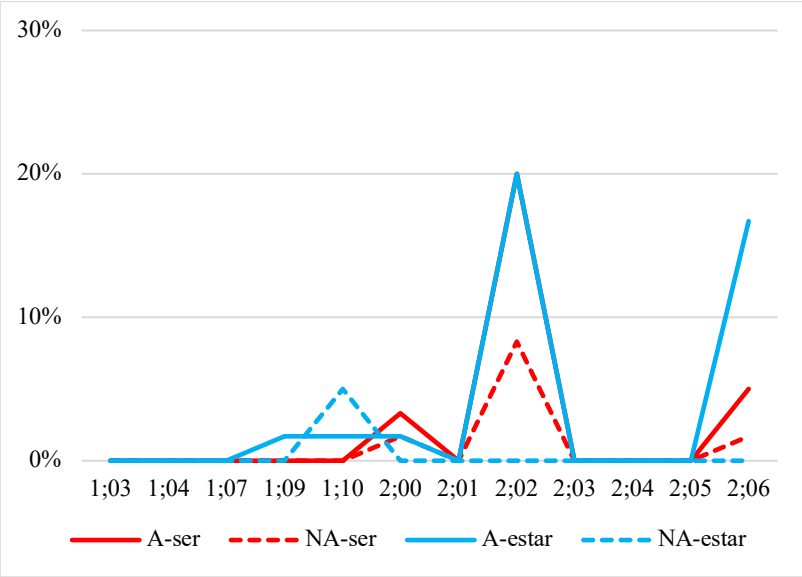

Figure 3-3. Developmental analysis: Manuela
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As seen in Figure 3-3 for Manuela, *estar* (1;9) appears earlier than *ser* (2;0), yet this difference is not significant (F(0.17)=4.96, *p*=.06). However, it is not until the age of 2;2 that she starts producing significantly higher rates of adult-like *estar* constructions rather than non-adult-like constructions (F(2.19)=4.30, *p*=.02). Contrariwise, she produces higher rates of adult-like *ser* constructions throughout the whole study period, yet this difference is not statistically significant (F(0.77)=4.30, *p*=.07).

The overall rates of adult-like and non-adult-like constructions produced by each child appears in Table 3-2. This classification collapses the *ser*-

estar distinction and the ILP-SLP distinction since all *ser* instances found in the data correspond to ILPs and all *estar* instances to SLPs.

	SIMON	LEO	MANUELA
A-*SER*	100% (19)	77.8% (14)	78.1% (25)
A-*ESTAR*	94.7% (18)	77.3% (17)	89.3% (25)
NA-*SER*	0% (0)	22.2% (4)	21.9% (7)
NA-*ESTAR*	5.3% (1)	22.7% (5)	10.7% (3)

Table 3-2. Adult-like and non-adult-like copula constructions

All the children produce significantly higher rates of adult-like constructions (A-*ser* and A-*estar*) than non-adult-like constructions (NA-*estar* and NA-*estar*) ($p<.05$ for all six comparisons). In the adult-like constructions, *ser* and *estar* show similar rates in Simon ($F(0.00)=4.41$, $p=.3$), Leo ($F(0.00)=4.41$, $p=.2$), and Manuela ($F(0.0)=4.30$, $p=.7$). Non-adult-like rates are very low although more omissions with *ser* than with *estar* appear in Manuela's production while the reverse pattern is seen for Simon and Leo. However, these differences are not statistically significant—Simon ($F(1)=4.41$, $p=.01$), Leo ($F(0.00)=4.30$, $p=.02$), and Manuela ($F(0.35)=4.30$, $p=.02$).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper deals with the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* as they appear in the early spontaneous production of 2L1 English-Spanish bilinguals. The focus is placed on the order of acquisition of the two Spanish copulas, the maturity of the clauses when dealing with ILPs and SLPs, the influence of the children's place of residence, and on how these factors affect the acquisition of this grammatical property.

Regarding the order of acquisition of the two copulas, the data analysis shows that Simon and Leo start producing *ser* earlier than *estar*, while Manuela shows the opposite. However, this age difference is not statistically significant ($p>.05$). Consequently, our first hypothesis is rejected as no significant difference is found.

As for the omission of *ser*-ILPs and *estar*-SLPs, and contrary to hypothesis 2, the data show that all the children produce virtually no omission with both predicate types. Although differences are noted between

the children, the number of cases is too small to reach any conclusions in this respect: Simon and Leo show higher rates of omission with *estar*-SLPs than *ser*-ILPs, while Manuela shows the opposite pattern.

Finally, a comparison in terms of linguistic context shows that no actual differences between the children raised in Spain and the child raised in the UK appear. Therefore, hypothesis three is confirmed.

The conclusions obtained in this analysis suggest that grammatical properties (the SLP-ILP distinction) rather than contextual factors (Spanish or English majority language context) determine the acquisition of the Spanish copula. Furthermore, these results are in line with those in previous studies in two respects. First, and given the presence of lexical specialisation in Spanish, as in Fernández Fuertes and Liceras' (2010a) proposal, no influence occurs from the one-copula language (English) into the two-copula language (Spanish), regardless of the majority language context that serves as the input for these bilingual children. And second, the early acquisition of the Spanish copula in these three bilinguals proceeds as in the case of the Spanish bilinguals and monolinguals in previous works (Fernández Fuertes and Liceras 2010a, 2010b, Silva-Corvalán and Montanari 2008, and Silva-Corvalán 2014).

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